DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 121 964 CE 006 714

AUTHOR Niemi, John A.
TITLE Some Facets of Cross-Cultural Communication and Their Implications for ABE and ESL Teachers.
PUB DATE 11 Mar 76
NOTE 15p.; Speech presented at Northern Illinois Area Workshop: Adult and Continuing Education (Rock Island, Illinois, March 11, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Education; Adult Educators; Adult Students; Classroom Communication; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; Communication Skills; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Factors; Culture Conflict; *Disadvantaged Groups; Educational Problems; *English (Second Language); Interference (Language Learning); Language Research; Nonverbal Communication; Oral Communication; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Cross Cultural Communication

ABSTRACT

Adult educators, recognizing grade communication problems between members of middle-class society (to which most belong) and individuals from culturally different groups are attending to cross-cultural communication research. Vastly different perceptions of reality, shaped by distinctive value systems and attitudes, underlie the problems. Intersection fields of experience, necessary to communication, may be extremely limited. Nonverbal transmissions are highly susceptible to misinterpretation. Communication barriers include differences in native language, the severe language limitations the "hard core poor" suffers outside its milieu, and the unrecognized reliance of many groups on nonverbal communication. Implications for adult educators are: (1) they must understand the communication process; (2) they must realize that they perceive reality differently from their students; (3) they must respect the languages of culturally different groups; (4) they should not overlook the importance of relevant oral communication in the learning process; (5) they must be acutely aware of the nonverbal modes of communication; (6) they must understand proxemics (the study of human space needs); and (7) they must be aware of the negative implications of superordinate-subordinate communication patterns. Finally, adult educators must utilize the vast array of materials and media available to them. (Author/AJ)

Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original.

ED121964

Some Facets of Cross-Cultural Communication and Their Implications for ABE and ESL Teachers

By

Dr. John A. Niemi
Professor and Associate Director
ERIC Clearinghouse in Career Education
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

CE008714

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Adult and Continuing Education
Northern Illinois Area Workshop
Rock Island, Illinois

March 11, 1976

I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet with you tonight. I see from our agenda that a number of important topics are scheduled for the small group sessions. In examining the student-teacher transaction, I note that care has been taken to cover both content (e.g., adults measure metrically, survival skills for E.S.L.) and process (e.g., tips on teaching reading to adults). Other important sessions deal with administration, counseling, and evaluation of ABE programs.

To my mind, an underlying concern in approaching any of these topics must be the process of communication. Thus, my topic for tonight is Some Facets of Cross-Cultural Communication and Their Implications to ABE and ESL Teachers. The importance of this topic was verified for me in our 1970 research study entitled Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult, which was published by Syracuse University.

I would like to begin by focussing with you on the topic of cross-cultural communication between the teacher and persons who are sometimes called "disadvantaged adults." I prefer the term "culturally different adults" to "disadvantaged adults." The latter term has acquired pejorative connotations because it sets these people apart as somehow inferior. Also, "culturally different" better expresses the tremendous diversity in a population that is set aside from the dominant middle-class society for reasons associated with race, nationality, education, occupation, income, and so on.

Research in the area of cross-cultural communication is increasingly commanding the attention of adult educators. They recognize the grave communication problems between members of the dominant middle-class society (to which most adult educators belong) and individuals from culturally different groups. The underlying factor is, of course, the vastly different perceptions of reality entertained on both sides. What are the bases of

these different perceptions which cause these groups to be strangers to each other? Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult reviews many studies which suggest that the perceptions of the poor are shaped by distinctive value systems and attitudes. Although the diversity of the group we call culturally different adults makes it difficult to generalize, it has been found that many of them uphold value systems that are clearly at odds with those of the dominant middle-class society. Because these groups foresee no future that differs much from the present, they tend to pragmatism and "present" orientation, a live-for-today philosophy that stresses immediate rewards. On the other hand, members of the dominant middle-class society lean toward future orientation and exhibit more willingness to wait for rewards. In practical terms, also, as a response to discrimination on the part of the dominant middle-class society, many groups reject its institutional structures (such as schools and universities) in favour of "small personal kinship, locality of friendship groups."[1] Incidentally, one should not affix "good" or "bad" labels to these findings, but instead treat them as valuable insights when working with these groups.

These different perceptions of reality have been researched by Hall, who comments that

> people from different cultures not only speak different languages but, what is possibly more important, inhabit different sensory worlds. Selective screening of sensory data admits some things while filtering out others, so that experience as it is perceived through one set of culturally patterned sensory screens is quite different from experience perceived through another.[2]

If we attempt to translate some of the research into a communication model, we might agree that, fundamentally, the communication process, in all its forms, involves the exchange of meaning between the sender (encoder) of a message and the receiver (decoder). Schramm's model is pertinent here.

Significantly, its Sender-Encoder-Signal-Decoder-Receiver pattern depends upon intersecting fields of experience, that is, common or shared events, ideas, and attitudes.[3] In fact, the points of intersection, as the concept is applied to the dominant middle-class society and the culturally different groups, may be extremely limited. Hence, it seems more appropriate and more realistic to talk about different "cultural milieus." We all know that in the cultural milieus we are discussing, the different perceptions of reality are communicated through both verbal and non-verbal modes. The verbal, involving speaking and writing, and succinctly described by Lasswell as "who says what in which channel to whom with what effect,"[4] has generally been better understood than the non-verbal mode. For one thing, our culture has traditionally stressed verbal skill and rewarded the literate man. Yet, non-verbal communication, sometimes called body language, is equally as important. It is partly instinctive, partly taught, and partly imitative.[5] Through this language, the receiver of a message can perceive the attitudes and inner feelings of the communicator. The study of body language has emerged within the past few years under the label "kinesics,"[6] which is described as follows by Knapp:

> Body motion, or kinesic behaviour, typically includes gestures, movements of the body, limbs, hands, feet and legs, facial expression, eye behaviour and posture. The furrow of the brow, the slump of the shoulder and the tilt of a head - all are within the purview of kinesics. Obviously there are different types of non-verbal behaviour just as there are different types of verbal behaviour. Some non-verbal cues are very specific, some more general; some intended to communicate, some expressions only; some provide information about emotions, others carry information about personality traits or attitudes.[7]

We sometimes forget that silence,too, is an important carrier of meaning. How many of us have suffered in the uncomfortable silence that follows a remark we wish we hadn't made. Obviously, the messages conveyed kinesically are more susceptible to misinterpretation than is verbal behaviour; that is, it seems easier for the decoder to read into body

movements messages that the encoder never intended.

"Proxemics," like kinesics, is a relatively new field of study that has important implications for us as adult educators. It has to do with the space needs of human beings and is described by Thompson as follows:

> Animals that live together, including humans, require space in which to move, eat, sleep, work and socialize. Proxemics proposes to describe and investigate how they use space as a rudimentary language system to pass information back and forth.[8]

Hall has conducted some interesting research on the variations in "proxemic patterns" among Americans, Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, and others. For example, Americans are sometimes accused of being loud talkers. As distance between them increases, they increase the volume of their voices and do not seem to care if they are overheard. The English, on the other hand, consider such behavior to be an intrusion on others' privacy, and carefully modulate their voices so that they barely override background noise and distance. In an American setting, this habit makes the Englishman seem conspiratorial. Such proxemic patterns, Hall warns, "point up in sharp contrast some of the basic differences between people -- differences which can be ignored only at great risk."[9]

To summarize our discussion of the concept of communication, we can say that this interaction includes both verbal and non-verbal transmissions, i.e., noises, silence, and the body language of posture, movement, eye contact, and facial expression. Non-verbal activities may precede conversation, occur in conjunction with it, or follow it. When they do, the total

act or phenomenon is referred to as "para language" or "paralinguistic behavior."

Given all these factors, what are some of the communication barriers that could occur? And what are the implications to us as adult educators who deal with ABE and ESL students? To answer the first question, one major problem relates to differences in language. The most obvious involves the non-English-speaking members of culturally different groups. And, even where such persons have attempted to learn English, "interferences" often arise from their native languages. Among a group of Finnish-Canadians, I found that many had evolved a "slang" which is a curious combination of English sounds approached through Finnish rules of pronunciation. "Finglish," as it is known in the United States, produces such words as "hospitalli" for "hospital" and "co-operatiivi" for "co-operative."[10] In addition, there are language problems attributable to regional or local dialects, as exemplified by certain expressions found to be common in Appalachia: a bein (being able); out he goes a playin (go out and play); she fixin (while she fixed).[11]

Another communication problem that we must concern ourselves with is language of the "hard-core poor," many of whom find their way into ABE classes. Their language, like other languages, has at times been maligned by the dominant middle-class society as inferior, sub-standard, etc. But such appellations overlook the value and the vitality of the language within the group itself. There, it is a viable form of communication, described by Bernstein as having "a simplicity and directness of expression, emotionally virile, pithy, and powerful, with a metaphoric range of considerable force and appropriateness."[12] As you have probably discovered,

this language serves admirably the needs of the group for an obvious reason -- encoder and decoder share the same cultural milieu, the same experiences, attitudes, and expectations. But, outside that milieu, and especially in the context of the dominant middle-class society, the language of the hard-core poor suffers severe limitations. Notably, because their verbal facility is restricted, these people often rely significantly on non-verbal cues in both giving and receiving messages. Thus, when receiving messages from the dominant middle-class society, the hard-core poor will often pay more attention to actions than to words-- an important point for educators to remember. As for giving messages, a study conducted at the University of Pittsburgh implies that certain features of the language used by this group render it almost incomprehensible to persons outside.[13] To complicate the situation, there is evidence that the language directed to other individuals or groups is sometimes deliberately contrived "to keep the outsider out."[14]

What are some of the difficulties with this language? An important one is that the language is "a predominantly descriptive mode of abstraction, rather than an analytic one . . . ." That is, it describes persons or events with little concern for underlying ideas or assumptions. Also,

> meanings are embedded in local and time-bound settings. The meanings depend, for full understanding, on the authority and other social relationships of the communicants, as well as on their ages, sexes, and other personal characteristics, on the time and place in which they are spoken. . . .[15]

Moreover, many distinctive words have been formed by various means, becoming idioms not easily grasped by outsiders. For example,

> Agentive Substitution [is] produced by substituting typical actions or functions of an actor for the actor himself, by the addition of -er (baby--crumb-crusher, pea-pusher; door--slammer; tooth brush--pearl-pusher. . .

> The use of words such as "job" and "man" as suffixes to construct new selections (e.g., crying--kleenex job; hair--comb job, grease job; outwitted--tank job. . . social worker--job man; neighborhood leader--man man; most respected or knowledgeable person--down man. . .
>
> Resultative Appellations -- This group of words is produced by selecting an extreme result as a substitute for its cause (e.g., angry--smoking; fight with a gun--blast; fight with a sharp instrument--bleed. . .[16]

Another communication problem has been succintly described by Vaudrin in his work with Alaskan natives. He reports on the difficulties that natives experience when they encounter

> regional or cultural idioms that are not in their field of experience, e.g., "bull in a china shop" or "out in left field." Such metaphors, used by a member of the dominant middle-class society in an oral presentation, might be taken literally by the native people. The result might be confusion on their part and a consequent tuning out of the entire presentation.[17]

And finally, before we turn to the implications of all these problems for adult educators, we must realize that when faced with language limitations, we all search for non-verbal cues, that is, for covert or hidden messages. The point is that if members of the dominant middle-class society fail to recognize the reliance of culturally different adults on the non-verbal mode of communication, the most sincere attempts at communication are bound to fail. Kleinfeld, who has done research among Alaskan native people, writes:

> Increased awareness of these covert messages and how they are communicated is especially important in cross-cultural relationships because of the heightened sensitivity of both parties in an unfamiliar interaction and because social symbols differ across cultures.[18]

Then there is the matter of consistency between verbal and non-verbal messages. Sometimes the covert messages which Indians receive contradict the verbal ones -- when a white man, for example, outlines a program designed

to help them, but shows through his kinesic behaviour (a shrug of the shoulders or a furrowing of the brow) his disdain for their values or his impatience with their opinions. Likewise, his ignorance of, or lack of attention to, proxemic principles may cause him to behave in ways that are puzzling or even threatening to Indians. This expression of the super-ordinate-subordinate relationship, with the white man assuming the dominant role, can and does become coercive. The stereotyping and prejudice which are thereby generated, often create a formidable barrier to successful communication. Byuarm, in a sociological study that set the conditions for interaction between negroes and whites on an equal basis at Mounds, Illinois, reported that the cleavage created by the factors I have alluded to made it impossible for either informal channels of communication to operate or for formal channels to open up for exchanges of views.[19]

Turning to our other question, what are some implications of these communication problems for us as adult educators in ABE and ESL? First, the adult educators must have a firm grasp of the communication process. It is important to understand communication models and to be aware of the factors which facilitate or impede cross-cultural communication. A vital factor in furthering communication is the empathy shown to people through a humanistic approach. This is manifested through the practice of talking with them, not to them or at them. Listening and observational skills are likewise important to the adult educators. Second, they must realize that their own background and training are likely to make them perceive reality differently from the adult students with whom they are dealing. They could unwittingly look at the situation through the lens of their own middle-class biases and assumptions and so misjudge the needs and expectations of culturally

different groups. To help avoid this pitfall, it is essential that adult educators involve the groups fully in the program planning process. Otherwise, they risk failure. Many programs have foundered in the past, because they have been based on the needs of the groups as perceived, not by them, but by persons in the dominant middle-class society. Thus, programs have been traditionally based on minimal skills in reading, writing, and computation, instead of larger configurations that stress "coping" with job demands, consumer needs, and the like.

A third implication arises from the immensely complicated nature of the language of the groups. Adult educators will err if they think that these languages are simple and easily mastered, because the people generally have a low level of education; or if they regard these languages as inferior and crude. Rather, adult educators must respect these languages for their qualities of utility and force and even learn, if they can, to understand them. Such understanding of a man's language is a valuable key to a man's needs and hopes. At the same time, perceptive adult educators will recognize the dilemma of individuals or groups who have only one "language" available to them. In other words, they lack the options of better educated persons who shift easily from colloquial language suited to informal conversations to more formal patterns as the occasion demands. The task, then, is one of educating members of the culturally different groups in the perception and use of the available language options, in order to improve communication between them and the dominant middle-class society. Fourth, in establishing programs with and for culturally different groups, the importance of oral communication in the learning process should not be overlooked. In addition, adult educators should make programs more

relevant by using figures of speech and idioms which are drawn from the learners themselves. Fifth, adult educators must be acutely aware of the non-verbal modes of communication. A knowledge of kinesics is important if the sender (encoder) of a verbal message is to relay that message successfully to the receiver (decoder). In particular, verbal and non-verbal modes of communication ought to be consistent and not in conflict with each other.

Acquaintance with kinesic behaviour patterns among culturally different groups is also necessary; otherwise, adult educators may inadvertently baffle, amuse, or offend them. Sixth, another relatively new field of study, proxemics, offers insights into the culturally determined space needs of various people. Again, it is important that adult educators understand proxemic behaviour patterns among culturally different groups. Seventh, the superordinate-subordinate communication patterns that have persisted between the dominant middle-class society and other groups need close attention. Adult educators should be aware of the negative implications of those patterns and do what they can to ameliorate the effects. Involving these groups in their own destinies, so to speak, is the key. Freire suggests this in his concept of "conscientization," described as:

> ...the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.[19]

Finally, we, as adult educators dealing with ABE and ESL students, must make use of the vast array of materials and media available to assist us in cross-cultural communication. One excellent resource is the ERIC Clearinghouse in Career Education, which has the responsibility for providing user services to you on a vast array of topics relating to adult and continuing education. Here, you can acquire help in the form of curriculum

guides, research reports, and evaluation studies. For curriculum materials, we are all aware of the regional centers which IOE is currently in the process of establishing and which will be a great asset to you in the classroom. Both of these resources should spur you on to develop materials of your own to meet the specific needs of your students. In closing, I can hardly do better than quote from Arkava's Sociology for Impoverished Life Styles:

> The general communications . . . approach is one that is based on the underlying assumption that confusion exists between individuals and social systems because they are not effectively communicating. The idea is that if people can see more correctly, communicate more adequately, and reasons more effectively, they will be able to lay a realistic common basis for action and changing.[20]

References

1. Darrell Anderson and John A. Niemi. Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education, 1970. pp. 29-30.

2. Edward T. Hall. The Hidden Dimension. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1969, p. 2.

3. Wilbur Schramm. "Procedures and Effects of Mass Communication." In Nelson B. Henry (editor), Mass Media and Education. Chicago, Illinois: NSSE, 1954, pp. 113-120.

4. Harold D. Lasswell. "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society." In Wilbur Schramm (editor), Mass Communications. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1960, p. 117.

5. Julius Fast. Body Language. New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 23.

6. Ray L. Birdwhistell. "Kinesics and Communication." In Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (editors), Explorations in Communication. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 5.

7. Mark L. Knapp. Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Company, Inc., 1972, p. 5.

8. James J. Thompson. Beyond Words: Nonverbal Communication in the Classroom. New York: Citation Press, 1973, p. 5.

9. Hall, op. cit., p. 129.

10. John A. Niemi. "English for 'Old Canadians': The Finnish Project in British Columbia." The English Quarterly, Fall, 1972.

11. A Husain Qazilbash. "A Dialect Survey of the Appalachian Region." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1971, pp. 313-359.

12. Basil Bernstein. "Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning." In A. H. Halsey, Jean Floud and C. Arnold Anderson (editors), Education, Economy and Society, 1961, p. 308.

13. Anderson and Niemi, op. cit., p. 27.

14. Rosalie Cohen, et al. "Implications for Culture Conflict from a Semantic Feature Analysis of the Lexicon of the Hard-Core." Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, Mimeo paper, 1967, p. 2.

15. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

16. Ibid., Appendix, pp. 1-2.

17. Bill Vaudrin. "Native/Non-Native Communication Creating a Two-Way Flow." Mimeopaper, Anchorage, 1973.

18. Judith Kleinfeld. Alaska's Urban Boarding Home Program. College, Alaska: University of Alaska, 1972, p. 2.

19. Paulo Freire. "Cultural Action and Conscientization." Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 40, No. 3, August, 1970, p. 452.

20. Morton L. Arkava. A Sociology of Impoverished Life Styles. Boulder, Colorado: Region VIII, Adult Basic Education Project at the University of Colorado, 1970, p. 74.